



The Earliest Americans

MAIN IDEA

POWER AND AUTHORITY The cultures of the first Americans, including social organization, developed in ways similar to other early cultures.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Americas' first inhabitants developed the basis for later American civilizations.

TERMS & NAMES

- Beringia
- Ice Age
- maize

SETTING THE STAGE While civilizations were developing in Africa, Asia, and Europe, they were also emerging in the Americas. Human settlement in the Americas is relatively recent compared to that in other parts of the world. However, it followed a similar pattern. At first the ancient people of the Americas survived mainly by hunting. Over time, they developed farming methods that ensured a more reliable supply of food. This in turn led to the growth of the first civilizations in the Americas.

A Land Bridge

The American continents include North and South America. They are connected and span two hemispheres, from the frigid Arctic Circle in the north to the icy waters around Antarctica in the south. Although this land mass narrows greatly around modern-day Panama, it stretches unbroken for about 9,000 miles. This large and rugged land is isolated from the rest of the world by vast oceans. Yet, thousands of years ago, the Americas were connected by a land bridge to Asia. Most experts believe that some of the first people came to the Americas from Asia over this land bridge. The land bridge is known as **Beringia**. Other people may have arrived by boat.

Peopling the Americas The first Americans arrived sometime toward the end of the last **Ice Age**, which lasted from roughly 1.9 million to about 10,000 B.C. Huge sheets of moving ice, called glaciers, spread southward from the Arctic Circle. They covered large portions of North America. The buildup of glaciers locked up huge amounts of the earth's water. It lowered sea levels and created a land corridor between Asia and Alaska across what is now the Bering Strait.

Herds of wild animals from Siberia, including the mammoth, migrated across the plains of the Beringia land bridge. Gradually, Siberian hunters followed these animals into North America. They most likely were unaware that they were entering a new continent. These migrants became the first Americans.

Thomas Canby, a writer for *National Geographic* magazine, spent a year with archaeologists as they searched for ancient burial sites throughout the Americas. From his experience, Canby described the type of world that might have greeted these hunters and migrants as they entered the Americas:

TAKING NOTES

Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects

Use a chart to list causes and effects of the development of the Americas.

Cause	Effect
1.	1.
2.	2.



PRIMARY SOURCE **A**

What a wild world it was! To see it properly, we must board a time machine and travel back into the Ice Age. The northern half of North America has vanished, buried beneath ice sheets two miles thick. Stretching south to Kentucky, they buckle the earth's crust with their weight. . . . Animals grow oversize. . . . Elephant-eating jaguars stand tall as lions, beavers grow as big as bears, South American sloths as tall as giraffes. With arctic cold pushing so far southward, walrus bask on Virginia beaches, and musk-oxen graze from Maryland to California.

THOMAS CANBY, "The Search for the First Americans," *National Geographic*

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Primary Sources

A What might account for the abundance of animal life that Canby describes?

No one knows for sure when the first Americans arrived. Some scholars contend that the migration across the land bridge began as early as 40,000 B.C. Others argue it occurred as late as 10,000 B.C. For years, many researchers have regarded the discovery of spearheads dating back to 9500 B.C. near Clovis, New Mexico, to be the earliest evidence of humankind in the Americas.

However, recent discoveries of possible pre-Clovis sites have challenged this theory. One such discovery was made at Monte Verde, Chile, near the southern tip of the Americas. Researchers there have found evidence of human life dating back to 10,500 B.C. Underneath this site—a sandy bank near a creek—archaeologists discovered pieces of animal hide and various tools. They also found a preserved chunk of meat and a child's single footprint. The evidence at Monte Verde suggests that the first Americans arrived well before the Clovis era. To reach southern Chile at such an early date, some experts believe, humans would have had to cross the land bridge at least 20,000 years ago.

Most experts believe the earliest Americans traveled by foot across the land bridge. However, some scholars think they also may have paddled from Asia to the Pacific Coast in small boats. A skull discovered near Mexico City has recently been dated to about 11,000 B.C., making it the oldest skull ever found in the Americas. Some scientists studying the skull believe that it is related to the Ainu people of Japan and that these descendants of the Ainu reached the Americas by island-hopping on boats.

Hunters and Gatherers

Questions remain about how and when the first Americans arrived. What appears more certain—from the discovery of chiseled spearheads and charred bones at ancient sites—is that the earliest Americans lived as hunters. Perhaps their most challenging and rewarding prey was the mammoth. Weighing more than seven tons, this animal provided meat, hide, and bones for food, clothing, shelters, and tools.

Following the Game Eventually, large animals like the mammoth were overhunted and became extinct. Hunters soon turned to smaller prey, such as deer and rabbits, for their survival. They also fished and gathered edible plants and fruits. Because they were hunters, the earliest Americans found it necessary to move regularly in search of food. Whenever they did settle in one place for a short time, prehistoric Americans lived in caves or temporary shelters in the open air. **B**

With the end of the Ice Age, around 12,000 to 10,000 years ago, came the end of land travel across Beringia. As the great glaciers melted, sea levels rose. The ancient land bridge disappeared under the Bering Strait. By this time, however, humans inhabited most regions of the Americas. Wherever they roamed, from the grassy plains of the modern-day United States to the steamy tropical forests of Central America, the first Americans adapted to the variety of environments they inhabited. In doing so, they carved out unique ways of life.

MAIN IDEA

Recognizing Effects

B How did the earliest Americans adapt to the loss of large animals?



Migration Routes, 40,000–10,000 B.C.

INTERACTIVE



Travelers across Beringia might have encountered landscapes such as this in Alaska.



At the Meadowcroft Rockshelter site in Pennsylvania, pre-Clovis blades have been found that date back many thousands of years.



Spearheads similar to these were first discovered near Clovis, New Mexico, and later throughout North America. Many of these artifacts date back to around 9500 B.C.



Recent findings at Monte Verde, Chile, have provided evidence of human life in the Americas as early as 10,500 B.C.

- Glacier ice, 12,000 B.C.
- Beringia
- Possible land migration routes
- Possible water migration route
- Fossil site



0 2,000 Miles
0 4,000 Kilometers

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- Location** What two continents does the Beringia land bridge connect?
- Movement** From where do scholars believe the first Americans came? How did they come?

> Analyzing Artifacts

INTERACTIVE

A Bison Kill Site

The first hunters roaming North America hunted mammoths, deer, and bison. Researchers found the bones of bison at a kill site near Calgary, Alberta, in Canada. This kill site is believed to have been in use for more than 8,000 years.

Different layers of remains and artifacts have been found at the kill site, with different kinds of points—spears, arrows, knives, and so forth. The different styles of points can tell archaeologists about the age of a site and its various layers. Weapons and tools such as those shown here were used to kill and butcher animals for the hunters and their families to consume.

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources

- 1. Drawing Conclusions** *What resources besides food might animals have provided to early hunters and their families?*
- 2. Making Inferences** *What might have been the effect of the weapons and tools of early hunters on the big-game animals of the Americas?*



About A.D. 1

The Pelican Lake style points are the youngest or most recent. They are about 2,000 years old.



About 2500 B.C.

The McKean style points are in the middle range. They are about 4,500 years old.



About 4300 B.C.
Mount Mazama
explodes

About 6000 B.C.

Other points, buried beneath a layer of volcanic ash, are the oldest of all. They are about 8,000 years old. The ash arrived in the Calgary area about 6,300 years ago when Mount Mazama exploded. Deposits beneath this ash are older than the eruption. The bones above are the remains of a young bison butchered at the site.

Agriculture Creates a New Way of Life

Gradually, the earliest Americans became more familiar with plant foods. They began to experiment with simple methods of farming. Their efforts at planting and harvesting led to agriculture. This dramatically changed their way of life.

The Development of Farming Around 7000 B.C., a revolution quietly began in what is now central Mexico. There, people began to rely more on wild edible plants, raising some of them from seeds. By 5000 B.C., many had begun to grow these preferred plants. They included squashes, gourds, beans, avocados, and chilies. By 3400 B.C., these early farmers grew **maize**, or corn. Maize soon became the most important crop. This highly nourishing crop flourished in the tropical climate of Mexico. There, a family of three could raise enough corn in four months to feed themselves for a long time.

Gradually, people settled in permanent villages in the Tehuacan (TAY•wuh•KAHN) Valley, south of present-day Mexico City. These people raised corn and other crops. The techniques of agriculture spread over North and South America. However, it is believed that people in some areas, such as Peru and eastern North America, may have discovered the secrets of cultivating local edible plants independently.

The Effects of Agriculture

Before Agriculture

- People hunted or gathered what they ate.
- Families continually moved in search of big game.
- Groups remained small due to the scarcity of reliable sources of food.
- Humans devoted much of their time to obtaining food.


After Agriculture

- People enjoyed a more reliable and steady source of food.
- Families settled down and formed larger communities.
- Humans concentrated on new skills: arts and crafts, architecture, social organization.
- Complex societies eventually arose.

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. **Recognizing Effects** *How did life change after the development of agriculture?*
2. **Making Inferences** *How might the establishment of agriculture have helped humans to develop new skills and interests?*

Over the next several centuries, farming methods became more advanced. In central Mexico native farmers created small islands in swamps and shallow lakes by stacking layers of vegetation, dirt, and mud. They then planted crops on top of the island soil. The surrounding water provided irrigation. These floating gardens were very productive, yielding up to three harvests a year.

Farming Brings Great Change In the Americas, as in other regions of the world, agriculture brought great and lasting change to people's way of life. The cultivation of corn and other crops provided a more reliable and expanding food supply. This encouraged population growth and the establishment of large, settled communities. As the population grew, and as farming became more efficient and productive, more people turned their attention to nonagricultural pursuits. They developed specialized skills in arts and crafts, building trades, and other fields. Differences between social classes—between rich and poor, ruler and subject—began to emerge. With the development of agriculture, society became more complex. The stage was set for the rise of more advanced civilizations. 

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

 Why might the development of agriculture be characterized by some as a turning point in human history?

SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

TERMS & NAMES 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Beringia
- Ice Age
- maize

USING YOUR NOTES

2. Which effect do you think had the most significant impact on the Americas? Explain.

Cause	Effect
1.	1.
2.	2.

MAIN IDEAS

3. How did human beings come to the Americas?
4. How did humans get food before the development of farming?
5. What sorts of changes did farming bring?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **FORMING OPINIONS** Why do you think early Americans, isolated from the rest of the world, developed in ways similar to other early humans?
7. **HYPOTHESIZING** What sailing routes might early humans have traveled to the Americas?
8. **COMPARING** What sorts of problems might the earliest Americans have encountered in their travels?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **POWER AND AUTHORITY** What type of person might hold power in a hunter-gatherer society? in a settled, agricultural society? Support your opinions in a two-paragraph **essay**.

INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY INTERNET ACTIVITY

Use the Internet to find information on early archaeological sites in the Americas. Locate these sites on an **outline map** and show the dates that scientists have assigned to these sites.

INTERNET KEYWORD

Clovis, Meadowcroft Rockshelter